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## Review

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## REVIEW

### Book Reviews

*Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today* by Abigail Lang and David Nowell Smith (eds.), New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 263 pp., 2015

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*Modernist Legacies* explicitly sets itself up as a response to the project of Modernism which also theorises how the history of Modernism has shaped contemporary writing. The edited collection prioritises both continuities and fractures that stem from this period rather than attempting either a repudiation or a transcendence, an objective it successfully meets almost entirely. In its deliberate use of marginalia, appendices and further lists, the book reiterates its status as a process rather than an object. In doing so, this volume establishes a constitutive relationship with the tradition it is claiming to describe, shaping provisional genealogies and tracing rifts and veining. There are two core contentions that mediate the arc of this text – firstly, that Modernism is still relevant, and secondly, that the book itself comes to form a horizon where old and new writing influenced by the period intersect and are sheltered.

There is an overarching political consciousness to the text in recognising and inserting marginal voices into the broader tradition of what followed from Modernism, a remit it aspires to generously but meets only partially. In its paratextual material, it chooses to trouble coherence and totality by adding a ‘non-exhaustive’ further reading list of 99 poets, arranged alphabetically, spanning across decades and each sprouting a network of other poets who might interest readers. While the necessary incompleteness of this list is acknowledged, it suffers somewhat for lacking a clearer metric for exclusions and inclusions, especially as the politics of erasure and exclusion of radical or marginalised voices within processes of anthologising is a key concern for this book.

*Modernist Legacies* centres its attention on British poetry and contends with attendant questions of class, capitalism and language (via Prynne's 'illusion of choice' in the notion of infinite interpretability). But somewhat concerning for a collection that features only four (out of fifteen) female critics and is overwhelmingly white, the introduction claims as fact that 'identity politics has had less purchase in the United Kingdom than in the United States' (p. 8) rather than attempting to read this as being symptomatic of the more toxic structural non-representation and silencing that marginalised communities have experienced in the UK.

The first of the book's three sections engages with a historical account of what followed from Modernism, beginning with the contemporary. Peter Middleton's chapter forms a commanding account of the divergences and conflicts that form the ecology of the British *avant garde*, tracing both separation from the publishing mainstream as well as intellectual departures from American radical poetics. In many ways, this is the defining essay of the collection, framing the complexity of the processes and forms of materialisation that language undergoes in the contemporary poetry that emerges from Modernism. Middleton produces a careful reading of the experiments in sound, syntax and vocabulary that are critical to this period in the work of three representative poets – Maggie O'Sullivan, J.H. Prynne and Peter Riley. In so doing, we are offered an account of how a language of trace, fracture and disruption comes to mark the edges of the very political project of British poetry, particularly in its engagement with class and the inadequacy of the category of the personal lyric. Experimental poetry, for Middleton, hinges on an ecology of critics and poets that frames a resistance to the problematic dominance of the mainstream.

Robert Hampson's interview with Allen Fisher sharpens the scope of a material cultural reading of the latter's work, and uses it as a lens to explore the *avant garde*. Fisher's *Place* is a complex project, which as Middleton previously discusses is marked by the poet's involvement with the intimate technologies of printing, codexing and circulation. The interview elaborates on the notion of space as sites inhabited and produced by experimental writing. The chapter traces the trans-Atlantic genealogies of influence and communication that have shaped Fisher's work, and its peculiar

presence in the dialogue between British and American poetry. A picture emerges of the networks of distribution that have historically facilitated this, including the role of shops such as Better Books, small press magazines, recordings and anthologies, thus yielding an understanding of site as something that 'contains' this poetry both textually and geographically. Through Fisher, Hampson generates a meditation on questions of depth and surface, of text and texture, within metaphors of excavation that someone like Riley might be interested in.

The final chapter of the section is by Romana Huk who produces a caustic critique of both the turn-of-the-millennium prediction of the demise of the *avant garde*, as well as of the subsequent anthologies that sought to occupy multiple poetic ideologies while disavowing the radical scope of any. She attacks insipid concessions to the mainstream and the apology for radical poetics that these collections frame. In Huk's essay, the British *avant garde* lyric becomes the key signifier for the legacy of British Modernism in its continuity and experiment. The innovative lyric enfolds political 'contamination' (via Wilkinson), performance, dialogue and the limits of context. I'd argue that a relevant critical lens here is also Prynne's twinning of resistance and difficulty as modes to access the depth of difficult political revelation in the overturning of familiar language. Ultimately, Huk's thesis hinges on a key argument she discusses from Caroline Bergvall, tracing back to Édouard Glissant – that the access to subjectivity is an accretionary process that relies on approaching lyric incompleteness in its appraisal of language as object-in-transformation. Comprehending the lyric subject therefore requires a recognition of the limits and scope of desire, underpinning the demands of both capitalism and of the patriarchy.

The second section on the nature and scope of the legacy of Modernism begins with Xavier Kalck's examination of the 'citational poetics' of Anthony Barnett. This chapter is, at its core, concerned with the issue of influence, discussed via the micro-structure of a citation, positioned within a matrix of departure and difference rather than affiliation or similarity. Kalck braces against the larger history within which this may be read, tracing the Objectivist lineage of a Poundian British heritage of experimental writing. What emerge are fissures and coalitions of influence – the familiar

affiliations of Bunting, Pound, Zukofsky on the one hand, and the Olsonian import of Prynne's early poetics on the other. The chapter's interest in the citational poetics of Barnett is framed against Marjorie Perloff's decontextualised practice and a tense appraisal of the problem of a tradition of expressivist writing within a language that is always irrevocably public. Barnett's use of citation offers an opportunity for the discussion of a provisional writing, dependent on the ecology of quotations, inscriptions, incompleteness and indeterminacy that characterised Modernism-influenced writing, including significantly its departure from the Prynnean 'tyranny of difficulty for its own sake' (p. 89).

Simon Perril's chapter on the continental legacy of Modernism captures the debt of influence contemporary poetry owes to the figure of the *poète maudit*, organising the political angst of poetry caught against a backdrop of anxiety stemming from high capitalism and questions of literary heritage. Perril offers a perceptive reading of three 'cursed birds' in Baudelaire, Sean Bonney and Anna Mendelssohn as a means of reading a new poetics of resistance and rage, intertwining sound, affect and body. In the reading of the compression of empathetic distance between the poet and the figure of the beggar girl in Baudelaire via Mallarmé, Perril foregrounds the presence of artifice, also mirroring this complex compression between the *poète maudit* and the modern reader. Mendelssohn's enigmatic *Bernache Nonnette* is traced as a subversive response to this original text, complicating questions of use value and guilt as a response to erotics within a late capitalist model. The chapter slips along the signifiers of replacement, refusal, referral and reference to culminate in a reading of Bonney's overwriting of the Baudelairean albatross, mediated by Cobbing. With the sign of the bird simultaneously elided and clarified, this provocatively renders myth into sites of transmission of lyric meaning.

Lacy Rumsey's close reading of the metrical legacy that stems from Modernism intertwines the question of speech with pleasure. Following from Middleton's discussion earlier in the text about the ways in which metre has historically been intimately connected with class connotations in Britain, we are now given a sharpened reading of how it comes to contain the capability of pleasure, in its sounding forth. Rumsey

examines Keston Sutherland's distinction of 'pure' versus ironic pleasure through her reading of Jeff Hilson's poetry, foregrounding the way in which the latter comes to be experienced as embodied and contextual. The position on embodiment, however, does not fully pursue the question of whose pleasure is under discussion, including the contextual permissibility of irony and the ways in which it might be politically mediated. Hilson's work comes to provide a fine template for exploring through linguistic sounding; a bodying forth that is a useful (and indeed, gendered) counterpoint to that of Bergvall's performance poetics in *Meddle English* and *Drift*. Rumsey's reading of metre captures the necessary 'discomfort and displeasure' (p. 120) of occupying multiple subject positions within an exploded sonnet form.

The only chapter in the book to predominantly deal with non-text forms of material culture is Will Montgomery's incisive unpacking of the history of Eric Vonna-Michell's cassette label Balsam Flex. The argument positions itself to trap the historical moment of the marginalisation of sound and changing technology within a post-Fluxus aesthetic. An important figure is Bob Cobbing whose sound experiments become vital to sustaining the kind of cross-national flourishing of cassette culture that Balsam Flex was at the heart of. The chapter carefully approaches multiple modalities of betweenness – art/poetry, text/sound, authority/resistance – that also set up the formal transitionality that a cassette culture relies upon. Crucially, there appears to be a consonance between the formal experiments in distressing the sonic medium and the experiments in text-based material culture. In the period of time since the publication of the book, the scope of the chapter has only broadened with the emphasis on new technologies (such as Drew Milne's lichen sound instillations) as well as the increased youtube-isation of poetic performance and consolidation of virtual communities.

The final chapter in this section carries forward this engagement with a difficult liminality. Vincent Broqua reads the work of Caroline Bergvall closely to delineate the 'infrathin' as the threshold that marks distinction, the structure through which questions of transitionality as well as limits may be investigated. This is a poetics that troubles the margins of language, geography, genre and objects, thus effectively

forming a micro-manifesto of the scope of the entire book. I was fascinated by the analysis of the weight of the shibboleth in Broqua's reading of 'Say Parsley', an ethics of attention that Bergvall's own forensic focus on the pixel in *Drift* explores. The chapter reviews the emergence of a complex consciousness under the shadow of a troubled marginality (body, text, word, subjectivity) in a compelling assessment of how space, sound and performance function in Bergvall's writing.

The final section of the book brings the poetic and the political to a somewhat uneasy proximity. Sara R. Greaves examines the commitment of Modernist-inflected poetry to epistemological frameworks that derive from a trans-cultural history and are precipitated into postcolonialism, such as that of hybridity. Greaves maps out her case to pin postcolonial experimental writing within a British tradition of engagement with hybridity, heteroglossia, and thus formal 'contamination', alongside the attendant problems of Western writing 'domesticating' or appropriating otherised forms. I found the chapter reluctant to place the linguistic strategies of postcolonial poets within broader political debates surrounding the exchange of power between states and subjects. The 'cosmopolitan' is offered as the dichotomy to oppressive insularity and rootedness but there is an anxiety in acknowledging the role of Modernist responses as having descended from the Empire, and its impact on race in poetics.

In his chapter, Nowell Smith examines the paradigms of difference that construct Englishness, reframing the experience of poetic pleasure and noise-making as political. Diasporic and immigrant Englishes are recognised within a paradigm of counter-colonisation, many of these voices liberated by a project of Modernism. Nowell Smith teases apart the links that exist between economic and linguistic resistance and development, thus locating metre with hegemonic cultural experiences structured in part by the nature of capital. His discussion of performing bodies activates questions of the relationship between racialised bodies, violence and performance, before approaching a theory of political change via the works of writers who express and mimic models of political marginalisation in their writing (and thus labour).

This argument is expanded by Luke Roberts, who uses the framework of political unrest as a context for reading contemporary poetry. The figure of the striker becomes



significant, as one who enacts and contains both poetic labour and disavowal. The chapter's focus is on Barry McSweeney and Frank O'Hara, but I found it useful to read other forms of political angst emerging from this template of revolution, including the work of Mendelssohn and the Angry Brigade. There is a foregrounding here of the violence of capital that turns to poetry in an arguably Modernist pivot towards seeking art as shelter and resistance within the industrial wasteland.

Samuel Solomon's chapter, that immediately succeeds Roberts', offers a complication of this model along gendered lines. It examines the role of women's intellectual networks through the mechanics of lyric unreproducibility in Wendy Mulford's work. This is a fascinating unpacking of the forms of (re)production that are valued against the rubrics of the domestic versus the public, and the complication of pleasure, labour and work inherent in this tension. Mulford's reproduction of the line is read against the nature of political action, the exploded 'I' of the lyric offering a rupture of authenticity and authority within a patriarchal community.

The final chapter by Drew Milne is a fitting framework of the entire text, collating lines of argument that have been pursued and abandoned at various points earlier, and offering an ecological account of the systems of intellectual histories and debates within which the text locates itself. This is a detailed and acerbic deconstruction of the questions of neo-modernism, subjectivity and radical form within a politics of war, commodification and prohibition. Milne examines the faultlines from and returns to a demilitarisation of syntax, ultimately offering a complex portrayal of the fragmented contemporary poetry scene with its many allegiances to Modernism and what went before.

While temporally, this volume places itself in the rich critical liminality of what immediately precedes and follows from Modernism, the future-leaning impact of the period is persuasively traced to contemporary cultural industries and influences, through both the theoretical vision of post-structuralism as well the splintering of popular forms such as pop music and digital instillations that shapes the cultural context of new poetry. The book also successfully revives and returns to what Milne calls a 'romantic anti-capitalism' (p. 236) within the contemporary scene. It is never

explicitly explained why 'Modernism' might continue to be a relevant term if current British poetry indeed seeks to overturn the advances of that period in pursuit of anti-capitalism – but instead, we are provided with a more complex, dialectical (and ultimately more satisfying) portrayal of the forms of making, undoing and the overwriting of influences and pressures that come with each period.

### **Competing Interests**

Srishti Krishnamoorthy-Cavell's PhD is supervised by Drew Milne.

*Boooooook: The Life and Work of Bob Cobbing* by William Cobbing and Rosie Cooper (eds.), London: Occasional Papers, 208 pp., 2015

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*Boooooook* is a beautifully presented survey of the life and work of Bob Cobbing, edited by the artist William Cobbing (the poet's grandson) and the curator Rosie Cooper, which consolidates the programme of exhibitions and events organised by the two since 2013 under the title of *Bob Jubile*. Like that larger project, the book developed substantially out of research into Cobbing's personal archive, split, as the editors' introduction notes, between the British Library and the Cobbing family. Although *Boooooook* is presented as a 'sort of companion' to the BL papers, only an editorial team also working with the latter, less accessible collection – gradually salvaged from Cobbing and the artist Jennifer Pike's former home in Petherton Road, North London, and still being collated – could have pulled together such a meticulously detailed and illuminating set of materials (p. 7). The introduction also implies something of the difficulty of distinguishing between the 'Life' and the 'Work' in Cobbing's case, his 'devotion to the production of other people's work' often meaning that 'he ended up erasing himself in the process' (ibid.). Indeed one of the conceptual quandaries to which the editors respond is the extent to which Cobbing's poetic output – presumably indicated by the word 'work', if we take poetry to have been his primary occupation – became overshadowed by his publishing and organisational activities – more likely, by that logic, to be covered by the term 'life' – even while such activities became integrated into his creative practice.

Before expanding on that point, it is worth emphasising the value of this book simply as a repository of facts, images, documents and reminiscences. The editors' biggest find is a folder of materials about Boooooooks, the book-shop which Cobbing had planned to set up with Pike, William MacLellan and John Collins after the closure of the Better Books paperback department in 1967, after which this book is of course

named. The new shop never opened because Collins held a raucous, impromptu party at the site shortly before the lease was due to be signed. But reproduced here are advertisements and flyers, floorplans, and a letter from Cobbing to one Mr. Spagnoletti, of E.A. Shaw & Partners, chartered auctioneers and estate agents: '[f]urther to our meeting on Friday 28<sup>th</sup> August, I have pleasure in submitting full particulars of the proposed use of the above premises' (p. 137). This cache of materials reveals an organisational nous and a flair for professional language implying some of the qualities – pragmatism, linguistic adaptiveness – behind Cobbing's success in negotiating the alien worlds of innovative poetry communities and public and professional bodies of various kinds.

There are similar document and image-based sections on Cobbing's prolific Writers Forum press; on Hendon Arts Together, the multi-arts organisation which he set up in suburban North London in 1952; on the Association of Little Presses, which he co-founded in 1966; on the various imprints and recordings of his breakthrough sound and concrete sequence *An ABC in Sound*; on the London Film-makers' Cooperative, and several other topics. One set of photographs shows Cobbing and George Macbeth visiting Downing Street in 1973 'to present views on the role of the Poet Laureate'. According to the editors' annotation, 'these views emerged as part of the Poets Conference, an informal trade union for poets, and an arena for the radical wing of the Poetry Society to discuss their opinions and strategies' (p. 172). The photographs remind us of the power which that wing briefly held, during the radical takeover of the Society documented by Peter Barry in *Poetry Wars* (2006). Though the 'work' as defined above might seem submerged in all this, there are also accounts of Cobbing's music groups, abAna, Konkrete Canticle and Birdyak, and a full-colour 'selected works' section. The non-chronological arrangement of this section means that pieces are grouped together by common motifs and means of production, emphasising Cobbing's huge range of mark-making and graphic techniques. It also includes reproductions of rarely seen early monoprints, sculptures and assemblages.

Strewn amongst the documents and images, and amongst a number of short, factual introductions by Cobbing and Cooper, are contributions from various

collaborators and critics. These range from further short, factual pieces, such as Robert Sheppard's introduction to *An ABC in Sound*, to less easily definable additions, like Andrew Wilson's notes on Better Books, reproduced verbatim from a 1965 issue of *Poetmeat*, but with appended footnotes compiled by Wilson which run to twelve pages. Will Holder's 'N156NT' is an excerpt from the expanding inventory for the Petherton Road collection, named after the postcode of William Cobbing's house, where the materials are currently being housed and processed. The hook is that the inventory is compiled by the visitors themselves in exchange for access to the items in question, essentially constituting a collaborative art and/or research project conceived and overseen by Holder. Its textual manifestation here (see the full version at [n156nt.uk](http://n156nt.uk)) shifts between sublime Goldsmith-esque banality and disarmingly comic or moving sections, notably documenting Cobbing and Pike's relocation to Petherton Road in 1984 from another Greater London Council property in Randolph Avenue, West London, where they had lived for twenty years. The dispute is mediated on the council's side by Ken Livingstone, one of whose letters to Pike is reproduced (pp. 198–99).

There are also more discursive pieces, such as Steve Willey's on the textual and sonic reincarnations of the poem 'Worm' between 1954 and 2002, and Sanne Krogh Groth's on the relationship between British, French and Swedish sound poetries. Some of these feel slightly cramped in their assigned space, particularly Willey's, which provides in truncated form the book's most insightful account of the life-work crossovers which make Cobbing's practice so tricky to pin down. The article employs a version of Herbert Read's definition of romanticism, whereby an artwork is understood as an unfolding process, each of its iterations involving a formative relationship with its context and suggesting the possibilities of the next. On this basis Willey reads both the symbiosis of poem and performance in Cobbing's 'dirty concrete' practice and his organisational activities as expressions of the same creative impulse. Restlessly moving from one host institution to another for financial and ideological support, Willey suggests, Cobbing was a kind of organisational romantic, whose approach to the presentation and circulation of his work evolved to fit each

new context, even as that context suggested its own limitations, and the need to move on to another (p. 16).

This leads us back to the conundrum mentioned earlier. The editors acknowledge the extent to which Cobbing's efforts as an organiser and proselytiser for other poets and artists compromised the reception of his own practice to some extent; perhaps even its development. At the same time, they maintain that he is 'best known as a concrete, sound and visual poet' (p. 5). However, as their first point suggests, while there remains a husk of opinion of that kind about Cobbing, partly left behind from concrete and sound poetry's frothy reception in the 1960s–70s, this perception of his practice has not been backed up since by consistent critical engagement. What have been more common are fact, date and anecdote-based accounts emphasising Cobbing's importance in establishing and perpetuating certain creatively innovative and politically progressive cultural scenes: accounts which focus on his life, taking that term to incorporate aspects of his work which might be seen as 'non-creative'. This book performs that task better than any previous work that I know of. But as a critical account of his work (his 'creative' work) it is less obviously forthcoming. The 'selected works' section, for example, passes by without critical framing: in obedience to Cobbing's own wariness of academic analysis perhaps, but in a way which might seem to reinforce the frequent and too-hasty perception that his work doesn't merit such analysis.

However, the book is more subtly thought-provoking on these issues. The occasionally carping assessment which Cobbing's work has received from a literary-critical angle partly suggests that the boundaries which literary criticism places around its object are still frequently too inflexible to accommodate it. It can be hard to find value in Cobbing's work when it is sought within particular poems taken as discrete, bounded entities, on the page or in performance. The processes of vocal and graphic reproduction, of incremental degradation and redefinition, to which he subjected any given piece were often more interesting than the content of that piece at any one stage of the process. Or, the content of a particular poem often comes alive for us only when we start to see it as a temporary manifestation of a larger, endlessly

evolving and intangible entity which is itself the artwork. If the work is the process, not located on the page or in performance, it is much more bound up with the life – or at least with the ‘non-creative’ work – than an inflexible literary-critical approach would allow. As Willey implies, for example, the enabling of and unfolding context for particular compositions and performances becomes a much more creatively significant backdrop or adjunct than is usual of a poetic practice. We might even take the more extreme position that Cobbing’s was in fact a kind of ontological practice, a performative experiment in being connected to the imperatives of psychogeography and Situationism, of which his poems were simply the documentary evidence. In either case – and I’m inclined towards the more moderate proposal – only an account of Cobbing’s work which is simultaneously an account of his life, and especially of the many other kinds of work which encompassed his poetic labour, is poised to respond to that work in a sympathetic and insightful way.

This book doesn’t explicitly offer such an argument, but the method of presentation implicitly troubles the life-work, or creative work-non-creative work, distinction. Pages of selected works are given equal weighting with photographs of performances – notably of Birdyak’s 2002 set at the Royal College of Art, a few months before Cobbing’s death (p. 181) – and documents outlining Cobbing’s temporary romantic liaisons with institutions, implying a gradation of practices from the explicitly to the implicitly creative. In some cases, notably that of Arnaud Desjardin’s interview with Adrian Clarke about Writers Forum, the creative and attendant ideological connotations of a task which might be placed outside a writer or artist’s creative remit – running a press and reading series – are directly explored. Desjardin describes Cobbing as ‘somebody who was continually creating networks’, emphasising a restless sense of evolution and permutation which underpinned his circulation and exchange of other poets’ work, and his establishment of relationships between them, as much as the reformulation of his own poems across years and decades (p. 36).

Accepting this expanded definition of the work, I would still like to have encountered slightly more discussion of Cobbing’s work in the conventional sense. Those pages of selected poems and artworks, amongst other things, chart and respond to

the development and obsolescence of various methods of D.I.Y printing and reproduction, from duplicators to photocopiers to desktop computers. A more frontal engagement with the relationship between Cobbing's poetics, its means of production and its attendant politics, and more generally with the remarkable processual poetics just outlined, would have been one way of enhancing this book's significance. A closer negotiation of Cobbing's *work-work* might also have allowed the airing of more general questions about the relationship between late-twentieth-century modernist and avant-garde movements and their early-twentieth-century forebears: about the nature of their originality, how old techniques were made new. The answer to these questions partly relates to the spread of established avant-garde and modernist idioms to new geographical locations, new socio-economic contexts and new cultural groupings, in the process of which they were seamlessly but integrally altered. One of the most interesting phases of Cobbing's working life was surely during the 1940–50s, when he delighted in enforcing the belated infiltration of modern-art aesthetics into the leafy suburbs of north London: 'I seem to have shocked a few people (including Mrs. Bate of Milldon) by my remarks on Thursday at the opening of our show' (Cobbing, quoted in the 1955 *Hendon Press* article 'Mr. Cobbing Sticks to His Guns', p. 26). There is a kind of *arrière-garde* spirit at work here – borrowing Marjorie Perloff's term for concrete poetry – which has not been closely interrogated in Cobbing's case. To do so might bring analysis of his work into line with recent discussions around late and regional modernisms, and might be more interesting than unqualified assertions of Cobbing's status as an 'internationally significant avant-garde innovator' (or similar), which can sound brittle in a context where general literary-critical interest in his work remains fairly low.

These are perhaps pointers towards a future book on Cobbing: a more academic book, which starts from the work in a narrower sense, and from the assumption that Cobbing really *is* a significant poet, but not in ways which have yet been fully defined. This excellent text opens up space for discussion around Cobbing's mercurial practice to continue.



## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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